

FRANK READE



WEEKLY MAGAZINE,

Containing Stories of Adventures on Land, Sea & in the Air.

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Price 5 Cents.

THE MYSTIC BRAND; OR, FRANK READE, JR. AND HIS OVERLAND STAGE. *By "NONAME".*



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THE MYSTIC BRAND;

OR,

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCES HOCUS POCUS AND ITS DENIZENS.

"I tell ye, pard, Black Bill air a bad chap tew handle. Thar ain't many on 'em as kin slip through Grizzly Canyon an' outen his clutches without payin' toll. Thar's my word on't."

The speaker was a tall, powerfully-framed miner.

He stood before the bar of the Gold Seekers' Refuge, the one hotel and gambling den of Hocus Pocus, a mushroom city of the Far West.

The place was well filled with a motley and varied crowd of men.

There was the flashy sport, the rough-dressed prospector, the befringed trapper and the cowboy, with his boots and spurs, the Mexican greaser and the half-breed Indian. Indeed, almost every nationality on the face of the globe was there represented.

Such is the power of gold, that glittering and alluring metal, which can in turn bring joy and comfort to needy homes, or make devils of men.

Many rich finds had been made in Grizzly Valley.

The little town of Hocus Pocus had sprang up almost

in a day. Law and order were not yet known, and every man was his own defender, and the pistol the arbiter of dispute.

Night was at hand, and the barroom of the Gold Seekers' Refuge was fast filling up.

The miners were coming in with their "dust" to purchase liquor, or play at games of chance, until some professional sharp had gained it all.

Big Jack Cronk, which was the name of the big miner whose words open this story, had sauntered into the place to indulge in a small drink of whiskey.

As he stepped up to the bar a tall and rather distinguished-looking young man, who was neatly dressed, had accosted him.

Conversation had turned upon the one all-absorbing topic of Hocus Pocus minds. This was the fiendishness and daring of Black Bill, the road agent.

The latter was a literal terror to the entire region. With his well organized band of robbers he held up coaches and trains, and even parties of travelers with impunity, and robbed and murdered as he saw fit.

Neither was his the only band of desperadoes on the Grizzly Canyon trail.

Beyond the hills and for a hundred miles across the Staked Plains there were stationed at intervals bands of robbers.

Hardly a coach of the Star Route service got through without a pillaging of the mail at least.

The contractors were in despair.

In vain they had appealed to the government for aid.

Troops had been sent upon desultory raids, but it only resulted in a brief interlude, and then a coach would be held up again and the mails rifled.

It could hardly be said that the drivers were in collusion for many of them were shot.

Bodies of armed men had been sent out time and again.

But each time the outlaws would come off victorious.

Three out of five weekly mails regularly went into the clutches of the robbers. This rendered communication with the outside world brief and seldom, to say the least.

The worthy people of Hocus Pocus were in despair.

Everything possible had been done.

There was an outstanding reward of five thousand dollars for the head of Black Bill, dead or alive.

Many a plucky scout or daring hunter had gone upon the trail, but always with a futile result.

And this was why Big Jack was so emphatic in his declaration made to Allan Wyman, which was the name of the young "tenderfoot" from the East.

Allan was a young college graduate with a widowed mother to support, and he had struck into the mines with the hope and purpose of making a fortune.

Thus far he had met with varying luck, having washed some few hundred dollars in dust.

The proceeds of this he had promptly forwarded home by the Wells Fargo stage, only to have it fall into the clutches of Black Bill.

So this was why Allan felt deeply aggrieved and impatient that so little effort was made to break up the road agent gang.

"There is certainly a way to mete out justice!" he declared, positively. "Some organized effort ought to be made."

Big Jack shook his head.

"Not jest yet!" he declared. "It will cum in time, mebber, as ther kentry grows larger. But Black Bill hev got the cinch now."

There was a resolute light in Allan's eyes, and he was about to speak again, when a startling thing happened.

In upon the night air there drifted sounds which brought every man in the barroom to his feet.

There was a low, distant rumble like thunder and the clatter of hoofs.

"The stage ar' cuming!" yelled one of the denizens.

Every man made a dive for the door.

Allan and Big Jack were, of course, among them.

Down the village street, with horses at headlong speed and lamps looking like fiery eyes in the gloom, came the stage.

Upon the top, inside, and on the driver's seat, were passengers.

Tenderfoots, newly arrived from the East they were, and as the stage drew up before the door of the Gold Seekers' Refuge, the faces of every one could be seen to be pallid and terror-stricken.

The driver, Bill Hurd, threw down the ribbons with a parting curse at the kicking broncho, which was nigh wheel horse.

He clambered down from the box while the change of horses was being made, and rushed up to the bar for a dram to steady his shattered nerves.

Then it was seen that his face was streaked with blood, and he wore a bandage about his head.

"Hello, Bill," cried the bartender. "What's been at ye?"

"Nuthin'; only a bit of a scrap wi' Black Bill," growled Hurd. "Toss me out some rum. Lively!"

This was done.

The rough reinsman gulped nearly half a pint of the raw liquor, and one of the bystanders ventured to ask:

"Held up agin, eh, Bill?"

"Yas," replied the driver, curtly.

"Pull the boodle, did he?"

"Took every durned mail bag an' pulled every man's watch an' money belt. Lucky fer me," he chuckled, "I don't hev any."

"But ye was hit?"

"Yas; dod blast 'em! One on 'em give me a shot along the skull. Made me a bit dizzy fer a while, but I'm all right now."

The change of horses had been made by this time, and Hurd went out of the door with a jump.

Up onto the box he went, and away went the coach.

Two men had alighted from the coach and entered the barroom. The other passengers remained aboard.

Big Jack Cronk shook his head.

"Black Bill air boss of the trail," he affirmed.

"Well, he won't be for long."

The big miner turned with a start, and saw Allan standing before him with a resolute light in his eyes.

"Eh, what's that ye say, lad?"

"You heard it?"

"P'raps ye know of a scheme whereby Black Bill kin be circumvented?"

"I do."

The miner gave a start.

"Air ye in earnest, lad?"

"I am."

"What kin it be?"

"I have not yet got ready to tell you. But you shall certainly know in due course."

"Waal, I never!" ejaculated Cronk, gazing at the youth in a puzzled way. "Mebbe ye're right. It's a powerful bright spot ye hev in yer brain, anyway. I wish ye luck."

"Thank you."

Before more could be said, a sharp outcry went up.

Everybody rushed into the open air again, and beheld a most thrilling sight.

Into the village street there had dashed a pony at mad speed.

He was foam-flecked and puffing heavily, yet did not abate its rapid stride until it dashed up to the door of the tavern.

Upon its back was a slender-built man, who lay over the pommel of the saddle, and seemed literally covered with blood.

He was at once recognized at Dick Leeds, a pony express rider.

In an instant willing hands lifted him from the saddle, and bore him into the barroom.

"Thunder an' guns," roared Jack Cronk. "It air my boy rider, Dick. Waal, I swan! What happened to ye, lad?"

The express rider was able to speak, and said, feebly:

"Run up agin Black Bill an' his gang; fought my way through. Mail is all safe on saddle. I'm—going—to die!"

The last words ended in a gurgle. A swift change came over the brave express rider's face.

He had spoken the truth.

He was doomed to die

His form stiffened, he gasped and the end came. Rough hands reverently straightened his form, closed his eyes and covered his face with a blanket.

"Anothed sample of Black Bill's work!" gritted Jack Cronk. "By thunder, kain't somebody wind him up?"

Allan Wyman had seen and heard all. He waited grimly for the distribution of the mail, which the plucky rider had sacrificed his life to bring.

There was a letter for him, and he retired to a corner near, and broke the seal.

Thus it read:

READESTOWN, July 20, 18—.

"MY DEAR FRIEND WYMAN: I received your letter, and have read it with much interest. It has reached me at a most opportune moment, and I embrace your plan with greatest alacrity. As luck has it, I have just finished my new invention the Electric Overland Stage. I had intended taking a trip across the plains with it, but the story you tell me of Black Bill and his gang affords me just the opportunity I desire for exciting adventure and a philanthropic use of my new invention. I do not believe that Black Bill will care to hold up the Electric Stage many times. If he does, it will be to his sorrow.

"I will start at once to the relief of the distressed people of Hocus Pocus. Give them encouragement. I shall bring Barney and Pomp with me. Be on the lookout. Hoping to see you soon, I am, as ever,

"Yours cordially, FRANK READE, JR."

The delight experienced by Allan Wyman at the wording of this letter cannot be fitly expressed in words.

CHAPTER II.

THE ELECTRIC STAGE.

Frank Reade, Jr., of Readestown, was a famed acquaintance of Allan's.

He was a distinguished inventor, noted the world over for his wonderful and peculiar inventions.

These took the shape of airships, flying machines, under water boats and electrical contrivances without number.

He was the possessor of a wonderful and secret knowledge of the power of electricity.

This had enabled him to furnish his machines with motive power, and so thoroughly familiar was he with the mysterious element, that he could bend it to his will just as he chose.

The electric gun was one of his most famous inventions, of which mention will be made hereafter.

Nations had offered him fabulous sums for the secret.

But he would not sell it.

Wherever the young inventor traveled the world over, he was accompanied by two devoted henchmen, one a negro as black as the ace of spades, and the other an Irishman, with as rich a brogue as ever came from Kilkenny.

In a happy moment Allan had thought of Frank Reade, Jr., and conceived the idea, somewhat vaguely, perhaps, that

he might be able to suggest some plan for the elimination of the road agent element from the Grizzly Valley.

He had therefore written to him, and this was the result.

Allan felt like executing a can-can dance, or a break-down, or something of the sort.

He was jubilant.

"Now, Black Bill, look out!" he muttered, with flashing eyes.

He was tempted to take Jack Cronk into his confidence.

But upon second thought he decided not to do this.

"I will surprise him!" he decided.

He did, however, stroll over to the office of Bugbee & Moss, the Star Route sub-contractors, who owned the stage line.

"We shall soon have the mails carried safely across the Staked Plains and through Grizzly Valley," he declared.

"Ah!" said Mr. Bugbee, a stolid and somewhat dull type of man. "How do you make that out?"

"A new kind of stage is coming here, which the road agents will not be able to hold up."

The contractors looked surprised.

Then they laughed.

"It may be so," said Bugbee. "I have not heard of it. A new wrinkle of Uncle Sam's, eh? Well, we're willing to give up the contract."

This was what Allan wanted.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I think I will take the contract off your hands."

Bugbee and Moss both looked at Allan with incredulous amazement.

"You're talking through your hat, young man."

"How are you going to carry the mails better than we?"

Allan smiled, and replied:

"I do not choose to answer that question. Neither do I want to relieve you permanently of your contract. This is my proposition."

"Well?"

The sub-contractors listened with interest.

"I will take your contract for a period of six weeks. I will agree to carry the mail from Los Pesos to Chanez for that length of time, and not lose a letter. You simply sub-let me the route for that length of time. I will then deliver it up to you. If I have not cleaned Black Bill and his gang out by that time, I shall forfeit all my earnings. Of course I cannot work for nothing."

The contractors were silent. Both were regarding Allan incredulously.

"Perhaps you can explain just how you are going to

carry out your project. You have neither stage nor horses."

"Yes I have!"

"What?"

"I have a stage, but no horses. I shall not require them."

"Is your stage run by steam?"

"No."

"What then?"

"By electricity."

Both contractors laughed.

"I don't know whether you are crazy or not!" said Bugbee, "but you appear to be a man mentally sound."

"I think I am!" replied Allan, "but will you accept my proposition?"

"Can you give us bonds that you will fulfill your contract?"

"I will endeavor to satisfy you."

"Then we will consider it. Call again to-morrow!"

Allan went back to the hotel and retired. But he slept little that night. He was in a state of intense excitement.

Morning came, and with it the stage. Allan was in the yard when it arrived.

There was but one passenger, and he was a fine-looking man of elderly appearance.

He wore a heavy beard and a hat with a broad brim, from the rim of which a string descended to his buttonhole, after the manner affected by travelers in India.

In fact, he had just returned from that clime, and had been making a tour of the wild West with his daughter, when he met with a terrible misfortune.

His story, as told in the barroom of the Refuge, was agonizing in the extreme.

"My name is Alexander Van Dent!" he said. "My hobby is travel. I have traveled the world over, and my one companion has been my daughter, Harriet. She is my only child and living relative. Last night the stage was held up and she was forcibly taken from it, and carried away a prisoner. I will offer a reward of fifty thousand dollars for her rescue and the head of Black Bill."

Allan listened with wildly throbbing heart.

Of course his sympathies were with Alexander Van Dent.

At an opportune moment he introduced himself.

A discussion followed in which Allan told Van Dent about the work of Black Bill, and the futile attempts made to effect his capture.

"But rest easy, sir!" he said, earnestly. "She shall be rescued!"

Van Dent gave an eager cry.

"You speak confidently," he said.

"I think I have full license to do so!" said Allan.

"But—I do not understand you!"

"Have patience and you shall. A friend of mine is coming here with the power to crush the road agent gang."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Frank Reade, Jr."

Van Dent gave a great start.

"Reade, the inventor?"

"Yes."

"Great heavens! I have heard of him. He is coming here?"

"He is."

"Thank heaven for that! Then there is a chance for me."

He drew a picture from his pocket.

"You have never seen my Harriet," he said, with a father's fondness. "Can you wonder that I love her? Have you seen her peer?"

Allan gazed upon the picture and stood spellbound.

In all his life he had never seen so beautiful a face before.

Delicate and finely penciled, it held an expression which was not only angelic, but firm and true, and indicative of a strong character as well.

He gazed at it for some moments, conscious of a strange feeling.

Allan Wyman had never been in love.

But truly, here was his ideal. He was aroused by Van Dent, who said, sharply:

"Well, lad, what do you think of her?"

"Beautiful!" gasped Allan. "I have never seen her equal!"

"I thought so," said Van Dent, triumphantly. "Her like does not exist. And—my God! to think that she is in the power of that villain!"

"It is horrible!" cried Allan, with great force. "She must and shall be rescued!"

"God bless you for saying that, lad," cried Van Dent, heartily. "I like you. Let us be friends."

Allan grasped the traveler's hand warmly, and said:

"It is agreed."

"You will help me find my child?"

"I will."

The situation was then thoroughly discussed. Finally, Van Dent said:

"Well, my lad, what can we do? Must we wait for the coming of Frank Reade, Jr.?"

"I have a better plan," cried Allan.

"What is it?"

"Let us go on to Los Pesos, the beginning of the stage line, and meet the electric stage ^{there}."

"It is agreed."

As neither cared to risk a trip on Bill Hurd's stage, it was finally decided to mount ponies and ride thither by an old and seldom used back trail.

The start was made, and as the two rode out of Hocus Pocus none there guessed their destination.

It took two full days to reach Los Pesos.

There a startling fact was learned.

Bill Hurd and his stage had failed to come in, and the report was current that he had been forced over the edge of a precipice on the mountain trail, and dashed to death with stage, passengers and all.

"No more stages over that line!" declared the informant. "I reckon Black Bill has ended that Star Route contract!"

"Never!" cried Allan, "here comes the proof of it!"

A distant, startling and wonderful object had hove into view.

This was the cause of Allan's cry.

Down the street of Los Pesos it came. Everybody rushed out to see what was the trouble.

The electric stage had arrived.

Horses, there were none. The stage glided along with the speed of a railway train, and made equally as imposing an appearance.

At the dasher, with his hands upon the guiding wheel, stood a tall, handsome and distinguished looking young man.

It was Frank Reade, Jr., himself, and as the stage came to a halt before the principal hotel, he stepped down from his position.

Upon the top of the stage at a railing stood a darky and an Irishman.

Barney and Pomp they were, inseparable traveling companions of the young inventor.

In a moment Allan Wyman was by Frank's side.

They embraced warmly.

"I am glad to see you, Allan," said the young inventor, warmly. "Now I am at your service with my new overland stage."

"Which is a wonder!" cried Allan. "But pardon me! Allow me to introduce to you Alexander Van Dent."

"What?" said Frank, pleasantly, "the famous traveler and author of so many books of travel? I have heard of you and am very glad to see you."

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Reade!" cried Van Dent. "I have heard of your fame in all parts of the world."

A lively and entertaining discussion followed.

Then Allan told the story of beautiful Harriet Van Dent's abduction.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTIC BRAND.

Frank Reade, Jr., listened to the tale with horror.

"It is dreadful!" he declared. "This Black Bill must merit his name!"

"Indeed he does," cried Allan.

"Well, we will see what we can do with him," said Frank, resolutely.

Then matters were discussed in relation to the carrying of the mails. Quite a number of passengers were waiting for Bill Hurd's delinquent stage.

A great crowd had gathered, and were looking at the stage wonderingly.

Allan improved the opportunity to mount a stump and make an impromptu speech.

He described the electric stage and its purposes. He explained how difficult it would be for Black Bill to hold it up.

The crowd cheered with delight.

The passengers were eager to get aboard, but Frank said:

"Come, Allan and Mr. Van Dent, I will show you the mechanism of the coach first. Then we will take out the mail!"

Neither Allan nor Van Dent were averse to this proposition.

Frank led the way to the stage.

The negro and the Irishman leaped down, and Frank introduced them as Barney and Pomp.

"Glad to see yo' sah," said Pomp, showing his ivories.

"The top av the mornin' to yez, sor," said Barney, politely.

Then Frank proceeded to show his friends the appointments of the wonderful overland stage.

And a wonderful affair it was.

In shape it was much like the ordinary tally-ho, except that it was larger, and squarer in body.

It sat upon a strong running work of steel, with four wheels, the tires of which were broad and grooved so that they would not slip on a smooth surface.

Beneath the body was the chest containing the dynamos.

Forward a high and wide dasher rose, with a cushioned seat back of it, and a brake and steering wheel.

Just below this was a pilot or cow-catcher, similar to those used on locomotives, with a sharp-pointed ram projecting from the dasher.

Doors were upon each side of the coach, with grated windows. Two windows upon each side and two in front were the means of outlook for travelers inside.

The top of the coach held a long rail with a sort of deck.

In the rear was a high seat, with steps leading up to it, and a flag hung from a staff bearing the initials of the inventor.

Upon the rear part of the stage top was a light dynamite and electric gun, resting upon a tripod swivel.

This was a most deadly weapon, and one of Frank's own invention.

Forward of the upper deck or top of the stage, there was a projecting roof, like the top of a chaise. Under this was a platform protected by wire netting, and to which access could be had from the interior of the coach.

This is an inadequate description of the exterior of the coach.

The interior held, forward, elegant padded seats.

But in the rear there was a living room, with small kitchen, and also little bunks for sleeping.

All the appurtenances necessary for a long journey and life aboard the stage were there.

The electrical machinery was of wonderful pattern and delicate manufacture.

The body of the coach was of toughest rolled steel, capable of withstanding bullets.

Altogether the overland stage was quite an engine of warfare. Electric searchlights were upon each side and the top of the vehicle.

Pressure upon an electric valve gave the motive power.

On a level road the stage could easily make forty miles an hour.

Both Allan Wyman and Van Dent were much impressed with the wonderful mechanism of the overland stage.

"I must congratulate you, Mr. Reade," said Allan. "You have a wonderful invention."

"So say I," chimed in Van Dent. "We will be honored to travel with you, Mr. Reade."

"You are quite welcome to take the run down the trail with me to Hocus Pocus," said Frank, cheerily. "Get aboard!"

All proceeded to do this.

Allan had fixed matters by showing his contract with Bugbee & Moss, and the mails were delivered to him.

Then the passengers clambered aboard.

Among them was a Quaker-looking individual with glasses.

There were two ladies and a cavalry officer, and a bearded gold seeker.

Allan Wyman and Van Dent took the high seat at the back of the coach, and Frank Reade, Jr., took hold of the guiding wheel.

Pomp was in the rear part of the coach where was the electrical machinery. There came a tinkling of a little bell, and the ducky put on the circuit.

Frank Reade, Jr., pressed the electric key, and the stage started.

The crowd cheered and the electric stage went booming out of Los Pesos.

In a few moments she was far out on the trail, and speeding along like a thunderbolt.

Allan Wyman remained aloft for some time, and then descended to the front platform where Frank Reade, Jr., was.

The young inventor was holding the stage steady upon the fifty mile run to the Grizzly Mountains just visible on the horizon.

This was in the verge of the famous Llano Estacado or Staked Plains.

A more desolate or dreary waste of country could hardly be imagined.

All was a monotonous sameness. The stage, however, could attain a high rate of speed, so level was the ground.

To be sure there were rough places, where it became necessary to slacken up.

But as a general thing a forty-mile clip was maintained.

This soon brought the Grizzly Hills into prominence.

There were several miles of rough, hilly, wooded tract to pass through, however, before the mountain pass was reached.

In this wooded tract the outlaws hovered, ready to hold up the stage.

But this was not yet reached, so there was as yet no danger of attack.

Allan engaged in earnest conversation with Frank.

"So you have no fears of Black Bill whatever with the electric stage?" asked Allan.

"None whatever," replied the young inventor, confidently. "I could whip as many outlaws as will stand between here and the Pacific coast."

"Good! I am glad to hear that. As soon as the road agents find that they cannot hold up the mail their vocation is gone."

"Certainly. Did you say that the driver, Bill Hurd, was killed?"

"That is the report."

"He and his coach and the passengers are at the foot of the precipice?"

"It is said to be the truth."

"Well, we had better investigate as soon as we reach the hills!"

"So I think."

The electric stage now went on with greater speed.

All the rough ground had been crossed, and a straight course lay ahead over the plain.

An hour passed. The hills were yet twenty miles away.

A half and then three-quarters came, and at length the last mile was covered, and the stage was in the timber.

The trail was smooth enough, and the stage hardly checked its speed.

Finally, however, Frank pressed the button and brought the stage down to a ten-mile gait.

All were keeping eager watch along the roadside. Suddenly Frank reversed the lever and brought the stage to a halt.

It was at a part of the road where there was a bit of clearing.

Here there were piled a heap of mutilated mail bags.

They had been cut, and their contents, in the shape of torn letters, were scattered about the vicinity.

Frank and Allan descended and examined them.

"Here is where the robbery was committed," said Allan, positively. "That can be easily seen."

"Yes," agreed Frank, "but first let us learn the fate of the stage and party."

So the electric stage kept on.

Now the narrow walls of the pass were upon either side.

For several miles the stage ran on thus.

There were marks and evidences of a fierce fight every step of the way.

But at length the trail came out upon the verge of a mountain wall.

Below lay jagged depths, fully a thousand feet below.

And here was found the traces of the struggle which had resulted in the stage and its human freight being precipitated into the chasm.

It was easy enough to see how it was done.

The path here was very narrow.

Above was a steep ascent. Down this heavy boulders were rolled, and striking the stage, swept it over the edge.

Frank was determined to learn if this was the truth.

So he brought the electric stage to a halt, and alighting, went to the verge of the precipice.

He peered over, but was not satisfied. He proceeded to clamber cautiously down to the bottom of the gorge.

Allan Wyman followed.

Long before they reached there the wreck of the coach was seen.

The carcasses of the horses lay in a heap at one side.

By a huge rock lay the dead bodies of two men. At the horses' heels lay the inanimate form of Bill Hurd.

He was dead.

There was evidence that every passenger on the stage had met death.

Frank Reade, Jr., gazed upon the mournful scene a moment.

Then he gave a great cry.

He bent down over the form of one of the dead men. A strange mark upon the man's brow attracted his attention.

"Great heavens!" he gasped. "What is meant by that?"

It was a strange and mystic brand.

Burned deep into the flesh by what seemed a hot searing iron was the hideous skull and cross bones.

The spectators were for a moment unable to make comment.

Frank Reade, Jr., carefully examined the brand

"It is either a hot iron, or the action of some chemical smeared upon the iron," he said.

Then every other body was examined.

The result was thrilling.

Every one of them bore upon the brow the same mystic brand.

CHAPTER IV.

AT HOCUS POCUS.

The meaning of the brand and the purpose of the one who put it there was a deep mystery.

Certainly, it could be for no motive of revenge, for the passengers of the fated coach came from different parts of the world, and it was hardly likely that they were united in ever having done any person a wrong.

But there was the mystic brand, just the same.

The party exchanged questioning glances.

"It would look as if some avenger had done it," said Allan Wyman.

The strange Quaker-looking personage, who wore the glasses, smiled in a curious way.

But Frank Reade, Jr., said:

"Pshaw! I believe it is only clap-trap work of the road agents. They mean to try and work upon the superstitious fears of the ignorant."

"I believe that is right, Mr. Reade," cried Van Dent, heartily.

Again the Quaker smiled.

"If thou thinkest it true," he said in a nasal voice, "witness here longer? The good book saith ashes to ashes and dust to dust. We will be merciful to bury these tenuousments of clay."

"Right!" cried Allan. "I beg your pardon, sir. Your cloth would seem to indicate that you are a follower of the Gospel."

The Quaker looked attentively at Allan, and replied:

"Verily, and were I not, desolate indeed would be my life."

"We are fortunate, then, good sir. Will you not read the prayer over this grave?"

The Quaker bowed piously.

"I can serve God in no better way," he said. "Alpheus Smoothbrow seeks no higher honor. Verily, verily."

No one felt disposed to smile at the quaint mannerisms of the Quaker.

It was a solemn moment, and very soberly they set to work to dig the common grave.

In it the victims of the wreck and the mystic brand were placed.

Then Alpheus Smoothbrow knelt and offered a long and pious prayer.

After this a return was made to the trail above and to the stage.

Soon all were aboard, and the stage was once more on its way.

It was a singular fact that as yet nothing had been seen of the road agents.

Whether the imposing appearance of the stage had given them fear or what it was, was not easy to guess.

Certain it was they did not put in an appearance.

Allan and Frank were forward at the guiding wheel.

"Do you really think Black Bill is the author of that brand?" asked Allan, seriously.

Frank turned and gave Allan a searching glance.

"Have you ever seen the mark before?" he asked.

"No; but I have heard of it."

"Ah! Where?"

"Not a month ago down here at the Red Forks, a whole plantation was cleaned out. The master of the hacienda, his wife and daughter, four peons and two cowboys were found dead in different parts of the ranch."

"And they had that brand on them?"

"Yes."

Frank Reade, Jr., was astounded.

For some moments he could not speak. Then a light broke over his face.

"Ah, I think I can understand," he said. "Black Bill and his gang went down there."

"It may be so," said Allan, doubtfully, "but if I should follow my presentiments I would believe that the work is the work of some strange avenger as yet unknown."

"It seems to be a mystery," said Frank, slowly. "At least, we will hold it so for the present. But it shall be solved."

"I hope so."

The electric stage was now deep in the pass.

Here it was that so many of the stages had been held up. But, singularly enough, not an outlaw put in an appearance.

All was as deserted and lonely as a wilderness could well be.

The electric stage was unmolested.

Through the pass it went safely, and soon was traveling down the grade into Hocus Pocus.

As the electric stage traveled much faster than Bill Hurd's bronchos had, it was now in view of Hocus Pocus long before the customary time.

Down into the mining town rolled the "innovation," as it might be called.

The entire population was out to welcome the arrival of the wonder.

The new mail stage which was to defy Black Bill and his gang drew up at the door of the Refuge.

The denizens of Hocus Pocus gathered about, several hundred strong, and regarded the new invention in sheer amazement.

Many and varied were the comments.

"Waal, I'll be durned! A stage without hosses!"

"It beats all of my wife's relations! How in tarnal ginger kin it go so fast by itself?"

"What in Tophet ar' this thing they call 'lecktricity, anyway?"

Big Jack Cronk grabbed Allan by the shoulders, and held him off at arm's length.

"Tarnal smoke!" he ejaculated. "Are this some of your work, boyee?"

"Well, I am instrumental in bringing it here," confessed Allan.

"What in durnation do ye call it?"

"An electric stage."

"What's that? What makes it go without nary a hoss? It's steam, I reckon."

"No; electricity."

"What's that?"

"Well, nobody knows. It is an element which exists,

unseen, of unknown origin, of wonderful force, and which man has learned to control and make subservient to his will."

Big Jack looked at Allan a moment in an incredulous manner, and said:

"Waal, it's all beyond me. You young uns is too smart fer us old uns, thet's all."

Quite a stop was made at Hocus Pocus.

The jovial miners were delighted at the safe arrival of the mail, and examined the new stage with interest.

Big Jack, in his jubilant frame of mind, got half seas over, and, mounting a barrel, gave an extemporaneous speech.

The gist of it was an uncouth eulogy of the stage, of Frank Reade, Jr., and Allan Wyman, the new mail sub-contractor.

Bugbee and Moss, the ex-contractors, were dumbfounded. However, they congratulated Allan in a warm manner.

All this while Alpheus Smoothbrow, the Quaker, had maintained his seat in the stage with pious dignity.

But when the crowd became suddenly boisterous, he was apparently annoyed, and, alighting, disappeared in the gloom.

Barney and Pomp had been busy all this while with the machinery, oiling and cleaning it.

Frank had been waiting for them, and Barney came forward touching his cap:

"If yez plaze, sor, it's all ready!"

"All aboard for Chavez!" shouted Frank.

The passengers made a rush for their seats. Allan and Frank sprang on to the platform, when a curious thing happened.

Something was thrown from the crowd and fell with a rattling sound at the feet of Frank Reade, Jr.

Astounded, the young inventor gazed at it.

Allan Wyman did the same.

It was a blood-stained dagger, to which was attached a written scroll.

"Heavens!" gasped Frank. "What was that, Allan?"

The young man picked it up.

He unrolled the scroll, and read in letters of blood, the following:

BEWARE!

"You think to vanquish Black Bill. But your electric stage will meet the fate of Bill Hurd's. No man can defy Black Bill's vengeance and live. Beware! You are on the death list. Beware!"

Allan could not help a bit of a shiver as he read the deadly message.

"Ugh!" he muttered, "that is hideous!"

But Frank Reade, Jr., tore the scroll into fragments.

"The bluster and bravado of a coward!" he declared, contemptuously. "He would never dare to meet us in open fight."

The stage rolled out of Hocus Pocus on the way to Chavez.

A run of one hundred miles across the Staked Plains must follow.

Fully a score of passengers were now aboard the overland stage.

Out upon the prairie it rolled.

Bowling along at so rapid a pace, with a sense of perfect security, the spirits of all were high.

Barney and Pomp had instantly struck the fancy of the travelers, and they became hot favorites.

Barney's dry wit and Irish humor captivated them all.

Pomp's comical manner and black face caught on great, and soon he was called upon for entertainment.

"Give us a song and dance, Pomp!" cried one of the passengers.

"Suah, sah, I had done fo'got all I eber knew!" protested the danky.

"Oh, we know better."

"Give it to us!"

"Start her up!"

The evening air was cool and balmy, and all were in the right mood.

Pomp could refuse no longer, and at once produced his banjo.

In all his travels the coon had never found his equal with the instrument.

He at once struck up a plantation melody, which was rare and sweet.

He was the possessor of a rare tenor voice, and in his inimitable way sang tune after tune.

The applause was great.

Indeed, the crowd could not seem to have enough of it.

Barney O'Shea, Pomp's compatriot, stood near and listened to all. In his good-natured, rallying way, he finally cried:

"Shure, that's all very foine. But it's nothin' at all compared wid Garry Owen and the blind fiddler av Kilkenney!"

The crowd caught the inspiration at once.

"Now we have it! Come, Barney, let's hear some Irish tunes!"

Pomp, who was not averse to calling a halt, laid down his banjo.

Then Barney yielded, and appeared on the deck of the stage with his antiquated Irish fiddle.

And few there were would could work the bow with the lively Celt.

The way he drew music out of that old fiddle was enough to stir the very souls of his listeners.

Barney's baritone was of a high order, and with his rich brogue he sang Irish ballads of indescribable sweetness.

It was a jolly ride to Chavez on the electric stage.

Those who participated in it never forgot it.

The whole-souled Westeners were for giving Barney and Pomp a big purse of money, but they refused to accept it.

And early in the night the electric stage reached Chavez. The trip had been a most successful one, but the future trips were not destined to be so free from trouble and thrilling episodes.

CHAPTER V.

POMP IN HIS ELEMENT.

The stage was to remain in Chavez that night, and return the next day.

Chavez was quite a respectable sized town, with a number of sizable stores, and a plentitude of drinking saloons.

It was a great headquarters for itinerant cowboys and plainsmen.

Barney and Pomp put things in apple-pie order aboard the electric stage.

Then Barney said:

"Begorra, naygur, I have a proposition to make yez."

Pomp looked up with a knowing grin.

The two were ever engaged in playing practical jokes upon each other.

Pomp half suspected something of this kind. But Barney's sincerity of manner disarmed him.

"Don' yo' know bettah dan dat, sah?" retorted the coon. "I amn't yo' bes' gal."

"Away wid yez foolin', naygur," said Barney, impatiently. "It's common sinse I'm talkin' to ye!"

"Wha' am yo' got to say?"

"On me worrud av honor, naygur, I'd loike to do up the town!"

"Yo' mean paint it red?"

"Divil a bit. Shure, we'll take a little inveshtigating tower about the place. See the soights, do yez moind?"

"A'right, sah! I'se yo' cucumber ebery time. I done fink we had bettah ask Marse Frank first."

"Shure, he'll niver care. Put on yez hat to kape the crowd out av yer wool, an' come on, Mavourneen."

Pomp was soon ready.

He dressed up in an ultra-fashionable suit of broad checked plaid, and donned a tall white hat, with a big bogus diamond the size of a hen's egg in his shirt bosom.

Barney put on his best green knee-pants, hobnailed shoes and swallow-tail coat, which he had worn in Ireland, and which, it not being the style in America, he seldom donned.

The two were perfect types of their different nationality, as they left the stage and strolled down into the town.

Of course they attracted no end of attention.

Everywhere they went all eyes were upon them.

This enhanced their conceit immensely, and it was not in the least abashed by overheard comments on the dude nigger and the sporting Irishman.

Barney and Pomp just pitched in for a glorious time.

They landed, after a time, before the bar of a cheap saloon, where, after plying the whiskey glass a few times, they became very communicative to the crowd which thronged about them.

All sorts of questions were put to them by the inquisitive and loquacious denizens.

Neither spared effort to lend the brightest and most vivid of color to their replies.

Indeed, some of the stories told the credulous miners by Pomp were just as lurid as the hue of his necktie.

"I say, stranger," said one inquisitive miner, clutching Pomp's buttonhole, "thet's an all-fired powerful masheen, that 'lectric stage of yourn."

"Hi!" exclaimed Pomp. "Well, yo' kin jes' gamble yo' peanuts on dat."

"I reckon you wudn't turn out fer nuthin' with that?"

"Nuffin, sah, on dis yearth!"

"Ye don't say so!"

"Didn' I jes' tell yo' so? Does yo' predilictate fo' to doubt mah wo'd?"

"Not a bit, cully! But I say, did ye ever meet a steam lokermotive an' hev to turn out fer it?"

Pomp elevated his nose contemptuously.

"Wha' yo' s'pose we cares for sich trifles as steam lokermotives?" he sniffed. "Lemme tell yo' de little incident, sah, ob a few days ago. We jes' met one ob dem steam lokermotives back yer a ways, an' it whistled, toot, toot, fo' us to git out ob de way.

"Marse Frank he didn' like de sassy way ob it, an' he say, I jes' gib dot lokermotive a bit ob lesson. So he jes' started de stage fo' it an' run bump into it."

The whole crowd was listening agape with interest.

"Waal?" queried the miner. "What cum of it all?"

"Why, sah," said Pomp, carelessly, "we jes' felt a lilly bit ob a shock. Den we went back an' tried to find dat lokermotive. Finally, Marse Frank he got a tellingscope an' by lookin' froo it we cud jes' see one lilly bit-ob a grease spot on de perairy, sah. Dat was all, sah, ebery bit."

The crowd drew a deep breath.

Some of them looked as if they would like a good-sized club, but the loquacious miner winked at them, and continued:

"That warn't bad fer a starter. Do ye ever mind running up agin a thunderbolt?"

Again Pomp gave his interlocutor a pitying glance.

He paused just long enough to get outside of a finger of raw whiskey; then he resumed:

"De bigges' thunderbolt we ever run up agin was up in de Rocky Mountings. Marse Frank he seen it comin' zip! zap! and he jes' pulled open de 'lectric key, an' when we struck dat ar' thunderbolt, dar warn't nuffin' but blue streaks in de air fo' a moment. Don' yo' beliebe, sah, dat we picked up forty 'leben pieces ob dat thunderbolt, an' we had jelly on de table for a month?"

The miner collapsed with this, and everybody retired for a moment to catch their breath, with the force of the shock.

Presently, however, a big Westerner advanced, and said:

"I say, coon, did ye ever try to ride a thunderbolt?"

"De berry las' time I did dat, sah," said Pomp, readily, "I circumnavigated de moon six times, an' den sold de thunderbolt for a fambly hoss."

"I'll bet ye ten tew one I've got a thunderbolt out tew ther door hyar ye cain't ride."

Pomp was instantly touched.

If there was one thing he prided himself upon, it was his horsemanship.

He looked steadily at his challenger, and said:

"Put up yo' cash, sah! I'll take yo' on dat!"

All the cash Pomp could scare up was ten dollars.

However, he planked it down on the bar, and the cowboy covered it with a hundred.

Barney's crowd now forsook him, and all adjourned to the tavern yard to see the fun.

In many a day the denizens of Chavez had not struck an opportunity for so much good sport.

The thunderbolt was quickly produced.

He was a small, inoffensive pony, and his owner got into the saddle and cantered him around the yard docilely enough.

Then he dismounted.

"Thar!" he said, "thar's the thunderbolt yew've got ter ride ter win thet hundred dollars. Looks easy, don't it?"

Pomp looked at the pony contemptuously.

It was so diminutive that he believed he could wind his legs about it, and hang on forever.

Oh, yes, he could ride that pony without a doubt.

He would show these Westerners a trick or two in horsemanship. Ordinarily Pomp would have used better sense.

But the whiskey was just vile enough to make him foolish.

Barney now began to egg him on in a peculiar manner.

"Begorra, av yez take my advice yez will let the omadhoun alone," he declared. "Shure, it's a bad eye he's got."

"Yo' g'long wif yo'sef, yo' no 'count I'ishman!" declared Pomp, indignantly. "Dis amn't no picnic ob yo's, anyway."

"Bejabers, an' it's lucky I am that it's not."

Pomp, angry beyond endurance, made a blow at Barney.

The Celt, who was sober, evaded it, and the coon fell on his face.

A roar went up from the crowd at this.

Pomp scrambled to his feet much nettled and very angry.

"I done kill yo', yo' no 'count Mick!" he roared.

"Yez won't not if I know it," retorted Barney, and the crowd laughed again.

Pomp was in a desperate mood.

He was bound to do something to vindicate himself, and that at once.

He glared at the meek looking pony.

Then at the owner.

"Yo' kin say good-by to yo' hundred dollars, chile!" he cried. "I'se done gwine to ride dat jackass, an' right now."

"I wish ye had some more money in yer clothes!" retorted the miner. "I'd bet ye any odds."

Pomp advanced toward the pony.

He placed a hand upon the bridle.

The pony did not move.

Then Pomp began to stroke its nose.

"Nice lilly hoss!" he said, in a conciliatory manner. "I'se jes' gwine to make fren's wif yo' fust off. I'se neber gwine fo' to hurt yo'. Easy now!"

Pomp got one hand upon the pony's withers. Then he made a quick leap.

He was actually upon the animal's back. The latter did not move.

The coon was amazed.

He was also convinced that he had played the winning card by conciliating the beast in the first place.

He picked up the bridle rein, and the pony actually began to trot away meekly.

But it was a hollow truce.

Suddenly and without warning the animal made a desperate plunge in the air and began to violently buck.

At first Pomp was taken unawares and sat upon the animal's ears.

But he came back into the saddle and clung like a demon.

He showed that he was really an extraordinary horseman.

He clung to the bucking pony with miraculous success.

It was just that wild spirit of recklessness that enabled him to succeed.

Had he been sober he would have been thrown. But the drunken man never knows fear, and will go through any ordeal.

The pony proved himself a peer in the bucking and kicking line. But Pomp stuck to him as if glued to the saddle.

Round and round the inclosure he ran, kicking and bucking all the while.

The owner began to look anxious.

Unless the coon was thrown he would lose his hundred dollars.

The crowd yelled and cheered.

Barney was amazed at the wonderful success of his confrere, and cheered with the rest.

"Begorra, the naygur will win!" he roared. "Here's to his success!"

In vain the pony tried to throw Pomp. Several times he had him nearly unseated.

But each time Pomp got back again. Finally the pony laid down and rolled.

But when he got up the darky was on his back again.

At last the mustang gave up.

He abandoned his efforts and Pomp was the master. The owner looked much crestfallen.

Pomp was cheered to the echo.

He dismounted, the owner said he was satisfied, and the wager was won.

Pomp had won his hundred dollars.

The stakeholder came forward.

The referee was consulted, and he decided in Pomp's favor.

Then the stake money of one hundred and ten dollars was paid over to the darky.

But the sequel was yet to come. The end was not yet.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HERD OF BUFFALO.

Pomp's egotism was far above the clouds, now that he had come out a winner.

"Huh, don' yo' s'pose dis chile kin ride any lilly pony like o' dat? Jes' yo' brung along a hoss nex' time."

He thrust the hundred dollars into his pocket.

With a self-satisfied air he strutted back to the barroom. Apparently he was the cynosure of all eyes, the admired of all beholders.

But the crowd now importuned him for a treat.

"The winner allus shouts!" was the general cry.

Pomp was willing to do this, and walking up to the bar planked down a twenty-dollar bill.

It was one that the horse owner had given him.

The bartender looked at him.

"Jes' yo' put out dat amount in good whiskey!" cried Pomp. "Dar am nobody yer gwine to say dat Pompy Alexander hab got small feet. Come up, my fren's, an' jine dis chile in de festive bowl."

"Drinks fer the crowd?" asked the liquor dispenser.

"Yas, sah."

The bartender picked up the bill.

He looked at it a moment, and then shot a quick glance at Pomp.

"Wait a minute," he said.

He vanished into an inner room. Presently he reappeared with the proprietor of the place, a big, fat man with a cast in his right eye.

The latter advanced, holding the bill in his hand.

"Donner vetter!" he exclaimed, in excellent German. "Vot you try for to do mit us, anyhow at all? Dot bill am no good, nohow!"

"Wha' yo' say dat fo', sah?" exclaimed Pomp, indignantly. "Dat am a good bill, sah."

"Nein!" expostulated the German. "Dot am one counterfeit! No good!"

"No use, cully," said the bartender, with a sinister smile. "That dodge won't work out here. Kain't pass no counterfeit on us by a long shot. Git out or we'll put ye in the jug. D'yer see?"

Pomp was very angry.

"Lemme see dat ar' bill!" he cried. "Don' beliebe it am a counterfit at all. Dis gentleman wif de bucking pony done gib dat to me!"

"What!" grinned the bartender, "was that one of the bills he paid his wager with?"

"Yas, sah."

The bartender guffawed.

"Then he soaked you for a sucker!" he cried. "Let's see the rest of 'em?"

Pomp pulled out the roll of bills and laid them on the bar.

It was too true.

Every one of them was a counterfeit except the ten he had put up himself. Pomp was aghast.

"Dey ain' wuff nuffin', den," he exclaimed. "By jim-inary, I'll break de head ob dat chap wha' cheated me dat a'way."

"Hold on," cried the bartender, "how about those drinks for the crowd?"

"Ain' got time fo' to stop jes' now!" cried Pomp. "I done see yo' later. By Jumbo! if I done catch dat rascal, I trim him down fo' a suddinty."

But Pomp could find no trace of the horse owner.

He had skipped.

Brimful of disappointment and disgust, Pomp quit the saloon and started for the stage in company with Barney.

It was in the small hours of the morning, and both were fatigued.

They had indulged in a lark which they were not soon to forget.

Both turned in and slept the sleep of the just until daylight.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Allan were astir at an early hour.

The mail was announced to close at eight o'clock, and the stage was to start soon after.

It was reckoned that Hocus Pocus would be reached some time before noon, which would be good time.

Beyond Hocus Pocus would be the ordeal. If Black Bill executed his threat, a lively time would there be promised the electric stage.

The stage had covered the route once.

Frank now knew the trail thoroughly well. He had outlined his plans.

"We will take the mail to Hocus Pocus," he said. "Then if we run across Black Bill, we will give him fight and follow him, if need be, to the end of the continent. We will not leave his track until we have silenced him."

"And perhaps we can rescue Harriet in the meanwhile," said Van Dent.

"That shall be one of our first moves," declared Frank.

At the appointed time the stage was at the hotel door.

Quite a number of passengers were on hand.

But no tickets were sold beyond Hocus Pocus.

Frank Reade, Jr., decided to carry nothing but the mail beyond that point.

Singularly enough, among the passengers was the curious, Quaker-like individual who had come up the day before.

Alpheus Smoothbrow took up his same seat in the canopy of the stage.

The passengers all clambered into the stage, the mail bags were tossed aboard, and then the start was made.

Among the passengers was one man of peculiar appearance.

Long yellow hair fell down his back, and he wore a slouch hat which half concealed his features.

He seemed to shun the companionship of the others.

But he seemed interested in the mechanism of the coach, and at times was caught studying the machinery.

Once Frank saw him in the act of entering the dynamo-room in the rear of the stage.

The young inventor said firmly:

"Hold on, sir. Passengers are not allowed in there."

The fellow stopped as if shot.

He mumbled something unintelligible under his breath, and then returned to his seat.

Had any one observed closely, they would have seen Alpheus Smoothbrow closely studying him.

The Quaker seemed more than ordinarily interested in the stranger.

The stage was soon bowling on its way over the Staked Plains.

For miles it ran at even speed over the smooth plain.

Then a section was entered where the grass was deep and over the wheels.

The electric stage, however, cut its way easily enough through this.

For some miles it continued, and the stage was right in the heart of it, when a strange thing happened.

A dark, waving line had appeared directly in the path of the stage.

Frank at first viewed it with wonderment.

Then he saw what it really meant.

Allan Wyman came rushing to his side.

"Do you see that?" he cried. "What is it?"

"Buffaloes," replied Frank, tersely.

"A drove of buffaloes?"

"Yes."

"Heavens, what a mass of them there are! There must be a thousand of them."

"Yes, six or eight thousand. They are a heavy body."

"What if they strike the stage?"

"They are apt to annihilate it."

At once the alarm spread.

All the passengers were on the qui vive. It was a grand sight to see the mighty herd moving down on the stage.

Every moment they drew nearer.

Everybody began to grow anxious and much alarmed.

Excited exclamations went up.

Some thought that Frank ought to turn about and fly before the oncoming herd.

Others thought he should try to dodge it to the right or left. In anxiety Allan went to Frank.

But the young inventor smiled grimly.

"Don't fear," he said, coolly. "I'll take care of the buffaloes!"

On it sped with fearful speed.

Nearer the buffaloes drew.

What a mighty trampling mass they were. On they came unable to check their mad speed.

Should they strike the stage it was hardly likely that anything would be left of it.

Now their heavy manes and tossing horns were distinguishable. With shaggy heads down they came on.

Like the rolling waves of the sea they seemed.

Now Frank Reade, Jr., acted.

He held the stage head on to the mass and brought it to a stop.

In a flash he sprang to the upper deck of the stage.

He whirled the revolving electric gun about, and thrust a dynamite projectile into the breach.

Swift as a flash he made the electric connections and drew aim.

He pressed the key.

There was a sudden recoil, a dull shock, and then far out on the plain there followed a tremendous cannon-like roar, and a mountain of debris rose high in the air right before the advancing herd.

A heap or mound of earth fully ten feet in height was raised by that explosion.

The buffaloes split about this improvised breakwater, and Frank Reade, Jr., had gained his point.

The great army divided and passed the stage upon either side without ever coming in contact with it.

A cheer went up from the passengers.

It was a clever trick.

But the end was not yet.

The buffalo herd was soon past.

But in their train followed something else. Upon the horizon there had appeared a long, blazing line.

It was a prairie fire.

No doubt it was this which had started the buffaloes upon their mad race.

Should it overtake the stage, the result would be serious, indeed.

Frank Reade, Jr., scanned the horizon for a moment intently.

Then he started the stage away upon the trail again.

He set the dynamos at their full capacity, and the stage literally flew over the ground.

Indeed, so great was the speed that the passengers grew alarmed.

"You won't kill us, Mr. Reade?" cried one of the passengers.

"I'll try not to," said Frank, grimly.

But every moment the danger increased.

Every moment the devouring flames drew nearer, and threatened to engulf the stage in their folds.

CHAPTER VII.

IN GRIZZLY PASS.

But Frank Reade, Jr., had no idea of giving up the race. He put the stage to its best speed.

And now just ahead could be seen the open plain.

If that could be reached all would be well.

On rolled the stage.

And just in the nick of time the edge of the burning tract was reached.

The flames swept away behind and the danger was past. Once more the stage settled down to steady work, and the spirits of all revived.

The run to Hocus Pocus was an unusually quick one.

The town suddenly came in sight, and in due time the stage drew up before the Refuge.

Frank had announced his intention of not taking any passengers to Los Pesos.

He anticipated a fight with Black Bill in the hills, and was anxious to have aboard only his own party.

The stage drew up before the door of the tavern.

One of the first to alight was the Quaker, Alpheus Smoothbrow.

He vanished down the street. Barney was deputed to collect the tickets, and he cried:

"Shure, Misther Frank, there's wan av 'em missing. Wud yez luk up into the canopy to see if he's asleep there?"

Frank complied with this.

He saw the yellow-haired stranger, who had been so interested in the mechanism of the stage sitting there, apparently asleep, with his hat pulled down over his eyes.

Frank spoke sharply.

"Hey, there!" he cried. "Wake up, my man. This is the end of the journey."

But the fellow did not move.

Frank went up to him to shake him.

At a touch he rolled stiffly over, and his hat fell off.

"Great heavens!" gasped the young inventor, "what is this?"

The fellow's breast held a dagger driven to the hilt, and his features were pale and set in death.

It was an awful sight, and one well calculated to shake the nerves of a strong man.

"Dead!" exclaimed Frank, and then an awful cry of horror pealed from his lips.

"The mystic brand. He bears it!"

This was true.

Upon the fellow's brow was the skull and cross bones burnt into the flesh indelibly.

For a moment Frank was transfixed with horror. Then Pomp and Barney reached his side.

The news spread like wildfire.

An immense throng gathered. That the unknown destroyer should boldly perpetrate his crime right on the stage was almost beyond belief.

Yet there were the evidences of his handiwork.

But the greatest surprise was to come.

The corpse was taken from the stage and placed upon a bier. Then it was found that the hair and mustache were false.

Removed, a different looking man appeared. Search of his pockets also revealed papers which proved that he was beyond doubt one of Black Bill's gang.

A letter from the bandit chief was found upon him.

This described how he should go aboard the electric stage as a passenger, and if possible, do harm to the machinery.

But his plans had failed, and death had become his portion, thanks to the mysterious destroyer.

Frank's whole force of reasoning was now changed.

He could no longer believe that the maker of the mystic brand was Black Bill himself or any of his men.

Who was he?

This was not an easy question to answer. Perhaps time would tell.

The corpse of the victim of the unknown destroyer was removed from the stage and fittingly buried.

Frank did a heap of thinking.

He tried to recall the face of every passenger aboard the stage at that time. Somehow he could not banish the face of Alpheus Smoothbrow from his thoughts.

"Impossible," he muttered; "that honest old Quaker would never do anything of that kind."

Once more the work of the unknown destroyer had been shown, and as yet no clew was to be found.

When would it come? That was not an easy question to answer.

A rough inquest was held over the body of the deceased.

There could be but one verdict, that he had come to his death at the hands of some party or parties unknown.

The stage was delayed in leaving Hocus Pocus that day.

Everybody knew well enough that a collision with the outlaws was expected in Grizzly Pass.

Hot times were anticipated, and among all interested parties none were more anxious than Van Dent.

He knew that it was his only hope to rescue his daughter, Harriet.

The electric stage left Hocus Pocus in the middle of the afternoon.

It at once struck into the hills, and soon the town became lost to sight, and the gray walls of Grizzly Pass arose on either hand.

As the stage went on all on board were careful to keep inside and out of the range of any stray or treacherous bullets.

This proved a wise precaution.

Suddenly, from the canyon walls, a storm of bullets came rattling down upon the stage.

But they glanced off like so many drops of water.

They could do no harm.

Frank smiled grimly.

He gave orders that the fire should not be returned.

"The time has not come yet," he said.

His purpose was to strengthen the confidence of the outlaws and invite them to make an open attack.

For this purpose Frank picked his way along very slowly.

Suddenly Barney gave a cry.

"Bejabers, an' wud yez luk ahead," he cried. "Shure, an' the pass is blocked entoirely."

This was true.

At a narrow point the pass had been filled in with great heaps of stone and logs.

The stage could not surmount them.

What was more, in their rear could be heard the thunder of falling rocks.

The outlaws were trying to block up both ends of the pass.

This would leave them practically in a trap.

Frank smiled quietly.

"By Jove," said Wyman, apprehensively. "I believe we are in for it."

But the young inventor laughed, and said:

"We shall see. Keep cool!"

He studied the barricade closely through a glass. Then he went on the roof or upper deck of the stage.

He leveled the electric gun and aimed fairly at the barricade.

Then he said:

"I am going to show you what a slight obstacle that really is. Look out!"

With this he pressed the button.

What followed was an astounding surprise to those aboard the stage.

There was a hissing sound, a shock, and the projectile sped on its way.

It struck the obstruction full and fair.

The result was amazing.

There was a loud roar, like the firing of a blast, and up into the air rose a column of debris.

Dust, fragments of wood and stone were scattered far and near.

When the smoke cleared away it was seen that a huge break had been made in the barricade.

Huge stones were ground to powder or shattered into fragments.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Van Dent, in amazement. "Whoever saw the equal of that?"

"Artillery is not in it."

"That gun would destroy the strongest fort in the world."

Frank smiled serenely.

"I think it would," he said, coolly. "But you have not seen all yet."

Once more Frank placed a projectile in the breech of the gun.

This time it was a projectile of double the length of the other.

He pressed the electric key and the gun was discharged.

Doubly loud was the roar, doubly severe was the execution done.

Every vestige of the monster barricade was blown to atoms.

The path was now clear for the stage to go ahead.

What the effect of all this was upon the outlaws it would be hard to say.

But they did not show themselves at the moment.

All firing from the canyon walls had ceased.

The coast seemed clear.

Frank sent the stage forward rapidly now.

Soon it had passed the barricade.

But the end was not yet.

Suddenly turning a corner in the pass a thrilling sight was seen ahead.

There, directly in the path of the stage was a large body of horsemen.

That they meant mischief was certain. At their head Allan fancied that he saw Black Bill himself.

There were certainly several hundred of the outlaws.

They were drawn up in solid line.

It was evident that they meant to oppose the progress of the stage.

In their midst was a huge pile of rocks intended to clog the wheels of the stage.

"There they are!" cried Van Dent, excitedly. "What shall we do, Mr. Reade?"

"Keep cool," returned Frank, calmly. "We'll soon fix them!"

The young inventor had thought of leveling the electric gun at them.

With its deadly bombs he could, no doubt, have blown many of them into eternity.

But it seemed too much like wholesale massacre to suit Frank.

He relinquished the plan.

"No!" he muttered, "that would be too bloody. Give them a volley with your rifles, boys."

Barney and Pomp, and Allan and Van Dent, were at the forward windows with their Winchesters.

They were ready to fire.

But an incident at this moment restrained them.

"Wait a moment," shouted Frank Reade, Jr. "It is a truce."

This was true.

One of the outlaws rode forward with a white flag in his hand.

He was masked, and his features were therefore not to be recognized.

"Hello, the stage!" he shouted.

"Hello!" replied Frank, appearing in the canopy.

"I want to talk with the driver."

"I am he."

"Waal, I am one of Black Bill's men, and he sends word fer ye to open yer doors an' toss out yer mail bags."

Frank Reade, Jr., was deeply impressed with this exhibition of assurance.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOUNDED OUTLAW.

Frank was so overwhelmed by the cool cheek of the road agent chief, that it required some minutes to collect himself.

Then his sense of humor began to assert itself.

"Indeed," he replied, finally. "Is that all that Mr. Black Bill wants?"

"I reckon so," was the reply.

"He don't want much, does he?"

"He only wants a fair thing."

"A fair thing?"

"Yas."

"Do you call that a fair thing?"

"An' why ain't it?"

"It is highway robbery. The mail bags don't belong to him, and he has no right to them whatever."

"It's the rule of the road."

"And what if I don't comply?"

"Then ye'll take the consequences. Jest a leetle while ago four passengers on Bill Hurd's stage were shot and killed."

"Was not that murder?"

"Murder! It was cussed foolhardiness. They oughter hed better sense."

"That is your opinion, eh?"

"It is. But what's the use of palavering? Air ye goin' to dump them mail bags?"

Frank leaned over the railing, and said, with some emphasis:

"No!"

"Ye ain't, eh?"

"I said so."

"It'll be the wuss fer you."

"I don't see it."

"Every man of ye shall die."

"Pshaw! That is bravado."

"It's bizness! Black Bill allus keeps his word. Mebbe ye think we're afraid of that cannon up thar. We'll spike thet in fifteen minutes. Hear what I say?"

Frank leaned forward, and said, impressively:

"Ten times your number couldn't do that. You go back and tell Black Bill he's a scoundrel, a knave and a fool. If he dares to attack this stage it will be the worse for him, I tell you!"

The outlaw laughed in a harsh, mocking manner.

"Ye like to hear yerself talk!" he shouted. "I tell ye to look out. Thar's squalls ahead. We give ye one chance."

At this moment Van Dent came upon the scene.

"With your permission, Mr. Reade," he said, "I would like to speak with him."

"All right," agreed Frank.

"Hello!" said Van Dent.

"Hello!"

"Are you one of Black Bill's gang?"

"Don't ye see I am?"

"Have you a spark of manhood left? If you have you will answer a few questions I may put to you."

"Waal," returned the outlaw, "if ye'll hurry; my time ar' quite valuable."

"Where is the young girl you stole from Bill Hurd's stage several days ago?"

The outlaw gave a start.

"Air yew her father?"

"I am."

The road agent laughed mockingly.

"That pooty gal is all safe," he replied. "Thar's goin' tew be a weddin' in Grizzly Range afore long. Ther chief is kinder stuck on thet gal. Oh, she'll be happy, I kin tell ye. Let us congratulate ye, old man!"

And the villain guffawed. Dent was so angry that he would have shot the fellow on the spot.

He had, indeed, thrown his rifle to his shoulder.

But Frank Reade, Jr., restrained him.

"Hold on, Dent," he said, "that won't do. You mustn't shoot."

"The villain deserves death!"

"No doubt; but he is a truce bearer. Wait until you meet him again in another capacity."

Dent subsided, and replied, with a voice quivering with passion:

"My daughter will never consent to such a union. I would rather see her dead, and die she will first!"

"We've tamed a wilder one nor she is," retorted the fellow.

Dent was furious, but Frank restrained him.

The young inventor now stepped forward, and said:

"Only your flag of truce protects you. Go back and tell your villainous employer, Black Bill, that he can never hope to capture this stage. That if he does harm to the young girl in his hands, he shall suffer fearful punishment. I mean what I say, and I have the power to destroy him and his gang."

The fellow laughed scornfully.

Then he wheeled his horse and galloped back. His report to his chief was evidently not met with favor.

For a yell of derision came from the outlaws.

Then Dent shouted:

"Look out! Here they come!"

This was true.

The outlaws were coming to the attack. Straight for the stage they rode in a body.

Frank saw at once the danger of collision with such a body of horse.

He was reluctant, but compelled to sight the electric gun.

He pressed the button.

There was a recoil and an unearthly roar. The projectile struck the bed of the canyon directly in front of the oncoming band.

A literal pit was heaved out of the earth in a twinkling. Great clouds of stone and dirt rose into the air, and quite a barricade was raised.

Over this and into the pit in a heap many of the riders went.

Others split right and left and came on furiously.

Before Frank could sight the gun again they were all about the stage.

Down from their horses' back they leaped and essayed to climb upon the stage. But Frank was ready for them.

The inmates of the stage were using their Winchesters with deadly effect.

But Frank Reade, Jr., had rushed up from the dynamo-room with a long coil of wire.

This he handled with rubber insulated gloves, for it was a live wire heavily charged.

Out into the mass of fighting men Frank flung the coil of electrified wire.

Shot and shell could not have created half the havoc.

Men were hurled right and left, knocked senseless or instantly killed. Wherever the deadly wire fell it made a wide swath.

And the outlaws were driven back by the mysterious force of the wire which went circling through their midst, and which no man could with impunity touch.

Right and left they were thrown.

It was as if some mighty giant was in their midst.

Their attack had been a plucky one. But human brawn and muscle could avail but little against such fearful power.

For fully twenty minutes the fight raged.

In vain the outlaws tried to get aboard the stage. Each time they were hurled back.

Such ineffectual work could not last long, and finally, the outlaws were forced to beat an inglorious retreat.

Frank followed up his advantage by chasing them down the canyon.

But they finally slipped him by dodging into a narrow path which the stage could not traverse.

It was a grand and signal victory for the stage people. Black Bill had received his first defeat. It seemed as if his long reign of terror was at last to be overthrown.

Of course those on the electric stage were very jubilant. But Frank Reade, Jr., was as cool and matter of fact as ever.

He had decided upon a plan which he believed would net good results.

He chanced to see a wounded outlaw in the pass. The fellow was shot through the leg.

He brought the stage to a stop, and ordered Pomp and Barney to capture the fellow.

They obeyed, and he was brought aboard the stage.

He was not a bad-looking fellow, though thoroughly frightened, and began to beg for his life.

"You shall not be hurt," declared Frank, "if you will answer truthfully a few questions."

The fellow's face brightened.

"I will," he replied. "To tell the truth, I am not a road agent by choice. I was pressed into the band, and did not care to leave for fear of death."

"What is your name?" asked Frank.

"Ben Walton."

"Where do you belong when at home?"

"In Pennsylvania. I wish I was at home now."

"Well, then, I'll make you a proposition," said Frank.

"What is it?"

The fellow was eager and interested.

"You shall tell us where Black Bill's den is and how to get there. If you will, I will give you one hundred dollars in money and your liberty. You can cut for home. Your wound is only a flesh wound. Out yonder is a pony which you can mount, and in twenty-four hours' time you are well on your way to Los Pesos."

Walton gave a cry of joy.

"Do ye mean it?"

"I do."

"Then it's a go."

With this the fellow proceeded to detail the route by which the stronghold could be reached.

He described it as a high, arched cavern, in the mouth of what had seemed to be an extinct crater far up in the mountain.

He gave a description of the various marks cut in the rocks by which the path might be found.

"But ye can't go thar with this machine," he said. "Ther path is too narrow. Only a hoss or a man on foot kin make it."

However, Frank was satisfied.

"And the young girl prisoner?" asked Van Dent, anxiously. "She is there?"

The outlaw nodded.

"Ther chief has her confined in a leetle room off ther main cavern," he said; "thar's a leetle crevice in the rocks overlooks ther gulch. If ye git in ther path at night ye kin see a light through it. A smart man could climb up by means of hanging vines."

Allan Wyman heard this with a sudden inspiration.

Frank was as good as his word.

He gave the fellow the hundred dollars he had promised. He was mounted upon the pony and set out for Los Pesos with alacrity.

The outlaws had apparently abandoned the vicinity.

Their defeat had been a costly one.

Frank felt certain of victory.

"In a week," he said confidently, "we will have Grizzly Pass clear of all perils, and safe for a child to travel through."

But one thing puzzled the inventor.

Walton had spoken of the strength of Black Bill's gang.

"They're gettin' weaker every day!" he declared in a superstitious whisper. "Do ye know I believe that old Satan himself is arter 'em. That's straight."

CHAPTER IX.

THE RESCUE.

"Why do you believe that?" asked Frank, with some curiosity.

"Thar's a powerful reason. Scarce a man in ther gang dares travel alone."

"Why?"

"Bekase the death's head would be sure to be found on him."

"The death's head?"

"Sartin. Haven't ye heerd of it? Why, it's ther cures-test thing ye ever heerd of. More nor a score of Bill's best men hev bin found in various places dead, an' every wan of them had a death's head burned into their foreheads."

"The mystic brand!" gasped Frank.

"That's it exactly," replied Walton. "I dunno who the fiend is, but most of us believe it's ther old devil himself."

Frank Reade, Jr., was much impressed by this story.

The mystery of the mystic brand had a strange fascination for him.

If the work of a human being, it would seem to be that of a madman.

The perpetrator of the strange crime seemed to spare no one, for had not the brand been found upon the members of the stage party who went down with Bill Hurd, as well as upon the outlaws?

"Queer!" muttered the young inventor. "I will solve that mystery before I leave this part of the world."

Walton was quickly on his way to Los Pesos.

Much of a valuable nature had been learned from him, and Frank was very eager to make use of it.

But there had come a sudden and startling change in the atmosphere.

A chilliness pervaded the air, and angry clouds were massed in the zenith.

Deep rumbling of thunder was heard in the southwest, and the moaning wind which came up the gorge was evidence of a storm.

Darkness began to shut down thick and fast.

It was out of the question to attempt to penetrate to Black Bill's stronghold as yet.

So Frank decided to wait for the break of another day.

Accordingly preparations were made for a camp, and the party ensconced themselves in the security of the stage to wait for the storm and night to pass.

Barney and Pomp made merry with the fiddle and banjo.

It was arranged that one should watch half the night, and the other during the latter part.

Frank Reade, Jr., Van Dent and Allan Wyman retired early.

But not to sleep.

Allan could not quiet his nerves. He arose and crept to the window of the stage.

He tried to pierce the wild gloom of the night. He was thinking of Harriet Van Dent, whose rare beauty had so strongly impressed him, far up there in the mountain cavern, the captive of a human fiend.

What was to prevent him doing her deadly harm?

She must be rescued.

Time was valuable, and Allan had conceived a most daring resolve.

He set his lips tightly, and muttered:

"I don't see why I should falter. There can be no better time. If I can only find the light in the mountain wall, the rest will be easy."

He remembered the story told by Walton.

He hastily donned his garments, and without rousing the others.

With his rifle and a lariat in his hand, he gently slipped out of the stage door into the darkness.

Boldly he struck out into the night.

Up the mountain side he climbed.

How far he went, through deep gorges and wild tracts of timber, he was never able to guess.

But finally he came out at the base of a high peak.

It looked like the locality described by Walton.

Far below in the woods coyotes were barking, and a panther was wailing.

The young Easterner studied the black peak outlined against the sky.

"Ah, if I could only see the light!" he muttered. "It would be a certain guide."

Then something like an electric thrill struck him.

What was that?

Could he believe his eyesight?

Surely, for up at the side of the peak a glimmering star of light shone forth.

He gazed at it so long and intently that he feared his eyeballs would leap from their sockets.

It was no optical illusion.

"It is!" he muttered; "there is the light, as I live!"

With feverish haste he was about to strike out up the peak.

But at that moment the heavens seemed suddenly to glow, and a soft light fell all about him.

A glance to the east told the truth.

The moon, a huge, silvery orb, had suddenly sprung above the horizon and dispelled the utter darkness.

Allan knew not whether to welcome this joyfully or not.

But at that moment something caused him to sink quietly down in the cover of a thicket.

This was the sudden sound of hoofbeats coming toward him.

Up the mountain side came a horse and rider.

He could see their forms in the silvery moonlight. The rider wore a mask.

That he was an outlaw was certain. Allan was watchful.

Then another and more startling thing occurred.

There smote upon the air, almost at Allan's shoulder, a peculiar hiss and a snarling cry.

What followed was brief and terrible. The young Easterner never forgot it.

Along the ground there crept swiftly a shadowy form.

Like a panther it reached the bridle of the outlaw's horse.

There was a sharp cry, the flash of a pistol, and then the pony was thrown and the rider unseated.

A gurgling, awful cry followed. The horse went madly plunging down the mountain. All was silent now as the grave.

Nothing was to be seen of the outlaw rider nor his assailant.

It required fully five minutes for Allan to compose his shattered nerves.

Then curiosity overmastered his fear, and he crept out of the thicket.

Some dreadful, irresistible power led him to the spot where the fray had occurred.

There upon the ground lay the stark form of a man.

It was the outlaw.

The mask was torn aside, and in the silvery moonlight Allan saw a massive, square-set face.

And upon the broad brow—good God! how awful!—the death's head—the mystic brand was there placed.

For a moment Allan Wyman crouched in awful apprehension that he might be the next victim.

But the murderer, whoever he was, did not reappear. Shuddering Allan turned away.

He put a goodly distance between him and the spot. Soon he was far up the peak, climbing toward the light.

He reached a point which seemed to him scarcely a hundred feet below it.

Here, as Walton had said, there were clinging vines upon the face of a cliff.

These were strong enough to bear his weight.

Up he climbed.

He was light and supple.

It was little effort for him to make his way up that natural trellis.

Soon he was on a level with the crevice in the rock.

And glancing through he beheld a sight which he never forgot.

He saw a square chamber, hewn by Nature out of the solid rock.

A stout oaken door was set at the outlet. The place was rudely furnished. The light came from a lamp supplied with bear's oil.

In the center of this cavern chamber stood two persons.

One was a man, tall, darkly handsome, but with ferocious, bloodthirsty eyes, and a set, cruel mouth.

The other was a shrinking young girl, fair as a dream, and whom the reader already knows as Harriet Dent.

Black Bill, the outlaw, was thus seen for the first time by Allan Wyman.

The young Easterner gazed at him with not a little of curiosity.

But Allan's whole being was fired by the words which followed.

"So, my untamed beauty, you will defy Black Bill, eh?" gritted the outlaw chief, in a furious manner. "I can tell you that that will avail you little. I am never crossed in my purpose."

"You will spare me further insult if you would merit my respect," said Harriet, coldly. "I have given you my answer. I will not marry you, and will die first!"

"That is your answer?"

"It is!"

"There are few women who would scorn the offer I have made you!"

"Leave me!"

Her manner was that of a tragedy queen.

"I will!" replied Black Bill, turning to the door, "but I shall return. When I do, I shall have the necessary persons with me, and I will show you how I tame such refractory birds as you!"

The door closed behind him with a clang.

Harriet Dent clasped her hands and lifted her pallid face to the crevice through which she could see the starlit sky, and groaned:

"Oh, God! Is this to be my fate? Will no one come to save me?"

Allan Wyman could contain himself no longer.

Acting upon impulse he leaned into the crevice, and whispered hoarsely:

"Have courage. I have come to save you, with God's help."

A wild, startled cry broke from her lips, then Harriet Dent rushed to the crevice. The light fell fair upon Allan's handsome face, and it required but a glance for her to read truth and honor in it, and know that he was a friend.

"You have come to save me?" she cried, huskily. "God be praised! Has my father sent you here?"

"He is not far from here," replied Allan. "You shall soon be restored to him."

Then hastily they exchanged stories. Hers was a thrilling one, and when she had finished, Allan had crept into the cavern chamber, and fastened one end of his lariat to a jagged spur of rock.

"Will you be afraid!" he said. "I must pass this noose under your shoulders, and lower you to the bottom of the cliff."

"I have no fear," she said.

Then the noose was placed beneath her shoulders, and Allan helped her through the crevice.

Gently, steadily, he lowered his precious burden down the face of the cliff. Then it was but a moment's work for him to slip through and slide down to her side.

The rescue was made, and Allan Wyman was in a deliriously joyful frame of mind.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTIC HORSEMAN.

But troubles were by no means over.

No sooner had Allan struck the ledge below than he heard a yell of alarm and discovery above.

"They have discovered our escape!" he exclaimed, with horror. "All depends upon quick work now."

"I am ready for anything," said Harriet, bravely.

Allan fairly lifted her in his arms, and rushed down the mountain side.

But in the dim light it was hard to tell which was the proper direction to take.

The mountain seemed suddenly to become alive with outlaws.

Flying hoofbeats and loud yells were all about them.

Suddenly Allan, from sheer fatigue, was obliged to stop.

"We must hide here somewhere!" he exclaimed. "They seem to be everywhere about us."

"It is best," agreed Harriet. "Let us seek yonder thicket."

But before they could reach it ruin overtook them.

Suddenly the outlaws seemed to spring from the very ground at their feet.

They were surrounded instantly.

Despair most awful overwhelmed both. Rough hands pinioned Allan, who fought savagely.

Lanterns flashed upon the scene, and foremost among the outlaws was Black Bill himself.

He came forward with a jeering laugh.

"Well, well!" he cried. "Did you think, poor fool, that you could steal my prize from me? You shall pay for this with torture of which you little dream."

"Monster!" cried Harriet, scathingly. "You dare not make war upon any but defenseless women!"

But the outlaw laughed.

"So ho, spitfire!" he cried. "At it again, are you? Oh, I'll tame you yet!"

Allan stood pale, but brave as a lion in the center of the group.

Black Bill advanced, and peered into his face.

"Ah, I think I remember you," he said. "You are one of the electric stage party. Well, luck is playing into my hands."

"It will not always," said Allan, coldly. "Villainy always meets its reward sooner or later."

"Don't preach to me!" snarled the villain. "I'll cut your heart out. Take him away, men. I'll deal with him to-morrow!"

The outlaws made a move to obey.

But the thrilling incidents of the night were to be undone by another even more startling than any.

A sharp sound smote upon the night air.

It was a terrible, soul-harrowing, blood-curdling, sepulchral laugh which rang and re-rang through the mountain air in a weird manner.

Then down upon the group like a descending thunderbolt came a terrible apparition.

It was a white, ghostly steed, with eyes and heels of fire. Upon its back was a black, lithe form, with all the lineaments of a skeleton shining forth in a blaze of light.

So sudden and awful was the appearance of this weird apparition, that not one of the party was able to move.

All stood spellbound.

Even Black Bill himself was enchained with deadly terror.

Down upon the group swooped the ghostly rider. So near did he pass to all that in a twinkling Harriet's light form was lifted in air and vanished.

The weird horseman was out of sight as quickly as he had come.

It required a full minute for any in the stupefied party to recover. Then one of them yelled in terror:

"Good God! It was the death's head!"

Allan Wyman realized in that moment with awful horror the true situation.

Harriet Van Dent had been transferred from the frying-pan into the fire.

In the power of the owner of the mystic brand, her fate would be too awful for serious reflection.

In that instant the young Easterner gave her up as dead.

And, indeed, why not, for it was believed that the mystic brand spared no person.

Not one of the outlaw band sought to make pursuit.

Indeed, with Black Bill they started post haste for their cavern retreat.

Allan was taken along as a prisoner.

Black Bill was in a cold sweat.

"Whether that be man or devil," he muttered, "he is ruining me for a certainty. It is my devil's luck."

At the crater cavern Allan was thrust into a small chamber underground.

On the morrow he was to be dealt with by the outlaw chief as he always dealt with his prisoners. Allan knew that this meant death.

He could hear the crush of thunder and the beating of the storm outside.

There was a crevice in the door of his prison cell, by which he could see the whole interior of the main cavern chamber.

The outlaws were all gathered about a huge fire in the center of the place.

They seemed engrossed in an exciting debate.

Foremost among them was the tall form of Black Bill.

Allan quite naturally began to consider the possibility of escape.

But this seemed slight.

The walls of his prison chamber were thick.

Moreover, a guard paced outside. The least attempt to make an escape in that direction would be fatal.

His position seemed hopeless.

Still Allan did not lose courage.

He kept up good heart, and was disposed to cling to a perfect faith that he would yet succeed in escaping.

Time passed slowly.

The storm continued to rage with unabated fury.

The crashing of the thunder through the mountain gorges was something terrific.

But the outlaws seemed oblivious to the warring of the elements.

Soon a keg was brought out and tapped. Liquor flowed profusely, and all drank.

In a very short while many of the wretches were in a beastly state of intoxication. Allan watched them grimly.

He noted the reluctant tread of the guard outside his door.

Allan understood human nature well enough to know that the fellow would not long resist the temptation.

And he was right.

After a time Black Bill left the group.

Where he went it was not easy to guess.

But the guard did not hesitate long. He moved forward and joined the drinkers.

Allan moved to the door and tried it. There was a bar against it upon the outer side.

He tried to force it, but was unable to do so.

It held firmly, and he saw that it would require an unusual amount of strength to break it.

In that brief moment a thousand things passed through his excited brain.

But yet he could devise no way of breaking the bar.

No time was to be lost.

The guard might return at any moment. Once more Allan put his weight against the door.

But he might as well have tried to push over the mountain.

It would not yield.

But the eve of a terrible crisis was at hand. At that moment a swift premonition of its coming dawned upon Allan.

There was a peculiar tremor of the earth, a strange quiver, and a momentary lull in the storm.

Then there came a roar and a mighty sound like the roar of waters.

Allan was thrown upon his face in utter darkness and half buried in debris.

What followed was to him ever afterward a weird unnatural dream.

It seemed as if the earth was rolling and tossing beneath him like the waves of the sea.

The entire universe seemed falling to pieces.

Then he aroused himself and a strange stillness was everywhere about him.

He could see nothing for the pitchy darkness. With an effort he managed to crawl out from beneath the heap of dirt piled upon him.

Allan sat up and for some moments tried to collect his scattered thoughts.

It required some time for this, but he finally succeeded.

He felt about him, and his touch encountered upon stones and dirt.

Then he became conscious of a breath of air upon his cheek. It was a powerful draught, and from the dampness he knew that it came from the night without.

Allan's first vague impression was that there had been an earthquake.

In this subsequent events proved that he was right.

For a long while he remained motionless. Then he felt a damp mist upon his cheek. He could hear the pattering of rain not far away.

What did it mean? Had the earthquake caused the crater cavern to collapse, and had he been miraculously spared from being crushed in the ruins?

So it would seem. A prayer of thanksgiving welled from his soul.

But what of the outlaws?

Doubtless they were crushed in the cavern. At least he could not see nor hear anything of them.

Allan finally grew resolute enough to decide upon a move.

He drew a match from his pocket and lit it.

This showed the vicinity quite clearly for some feet about.

The walls of his prison chamber had not collapsed, except upon one side, and that the one in which was the door.

With a thrill, Allan crept in this direction.

He could see nothing, but he felt every moment that he was clambering upward into the open air.

Up, up he went, over boulder and ledge. All was a cloak of darkness.

But looking directly upward he saw a twinkling star between jagged reefs of clouds.

The rain had ceased.

The clouds were drifting rapidly into the east. Suddenly the moon once more burst forth in all her splendor.

The dripping country was revealed. Allan glanced about him and then down into the crater.

Part of the cavern had collapsed. But evidently not all of the outlaws had been crushed, for he heard voices and saw dark forms scaling the opposite side.

He even heard the jarring voice of Black Bill giving angry orders.

"What a pity that it did not crush all of them," muttered the young Easterner. "Well, this won't do for me."

He knew the deadly risk of lingering longer in the place.

He crept down into the shadows of the woods below.

How long he wandered aimlessly about in the wilds he never knew.

But at daybreak he came out upon a shelf of rock overlooking a small gulch.

And up this, with a peculiar thrill, he saw three men climbing. They were well known to him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OUTLAW'S ATTACK.

The three men were Frank Reade, Jr., Van Dent and Barney.

Pomp had been left in charge of the electric stage.

The three daring men were actually invading the stronghold of Black Bill.

It seemed, indeed, a risky thing to do in broad daylight. But they were proceeding with great caution.

Allan did not wait for ceremony, but started down toward them.

With a loud cry he attracted their attention.

They halted as they saw him coming.

Soon he was by their side.

Then they listened to the story of his exciting experiences with the deepest interest.

Van Dent nearly fainted when told that Harriet was in the power of the mystic unknown.

But he would not give her up, and cried:

"She shall be saved! I will not believe her lost!"

"Right!" cried Frank. "I mean to run to earth this maniac, and I will not desist until I do."

It was decided to push on up to the crater.

Frank was desirous of making an examination of the place.

"We will keep a good lookout for the outlaws," he declared.

So they pushed on up the mountain.

It was not long before they reached the verge of the crater.

Then the work of the earthquake was to be plainly seen.

A deep fissure had been made in the side of the peak.

The crater had been literally upheaved, and now the spot where the outlaws' cave had been could be seen.

Much was left of it yet, though beneath the ruins there were buried, and in spots half visible, remains of the outlaws.

But not one of the survivors could be seen.

They had vacated the vicinity in hot haste.

Their trail was found leading down the mountain, but Frank decided not to follow it.

He examined the former stronghold of the outlaws closely.

Then he said:

"We have no interest at stake here. It is my belief that Black Bill has entered upon the downward path. Even the elements are conspiring against him."

"Then let us return," said Van Dent, anxiously.

"Begorra, I'm afther thinkin' it's a hunt now fer the mystic brand!" cried Barney.

"That is right!" cried Frank. "We must run that scoundrel to earth."

Back to the electric stage consequently all went.

All that day the search was continued for the mysterious avenger.

But not a trace of him could be found anywhere.

At length nightfall came.

As nothing could be gained by remaining over night in the vicinity, Frank decided to push on to Hocus Pocus and remain until the morrow.

This was done.

When the electric stage once more rolled up to the door of the Refuge, a vast crowd greeted it.

A number of scouts had invaded Grizzly Canyon and discovered the results of the battle with Black Bill.

The people were all elated at the defeat of the outlaw chief.

They gave Frank Reade, Jr., an ovation.

One of their number placed the freedom of the town at their disposal, but Frank declined this honor with thanks.

Barney and Pomp, however, pitched in for a good time.

They invaded the barroom of the Refuge, and soon had the crowd roaring with their quaint wit.

Allan and Van Dent wandered off down the street of the town.

The latter was under a severe mental strain.

The former was almost as badly off, but yet more composed.

"My God," said the millionaire, "shall I ever see my darling child again? My soul is shrouded in darkness!"

"We will hope for the best," said Allan.

"Ah, but how near you came to effecting her rescue! If you had only been successful."

"Fate was against us," said Allan, "but we must cling to hope."

"Do you really believe that maniac, for such he must be, will harm her?"

Allan drew a deep breath.

"Let us pray not," he said.

They had by this time reached the end of the street.

Allan had halted, and chanced to glance up to the high mountain wall which overlooked the valley.

As he did so, he beheld a curious sight which gave him a start.

A vivid flame appeared for the moment, lit up the blackness, was waved to and fro several times, and then vanished.

From a point lower down instantly another signal of the same kind was seen.

Allan turned his head and saw the same spectacle upon the opposite side of the valley.

That it was a signal he had no doubt.

Van Dent also saw the spectacle, and turned an inquiring glance upon Allan.

"What on earth is that?" he asked, sharply.

"I believe they are signals."

"What are they for?"

"The outlaws are up to some dodge."

The two men exchanged startled glances.

The same thought was in the mind of each. It was well known that Black Bill had often threatened a raid upon the town.

Was this his purpose?

Whether it was or not, Allan felt that it would be better to spread the alarm, and have everybody on guard.

A body of armed men as large as Black Bill's gang could, no doubt, wipe a town like Hocus Pocus out of existence.

Allan was about to start back into the town when Van Dent clutched his arm.

"Down!" he gasped. "Quick, or my God, we are lost!"

Down into a thicket they sank.

They were not a moment too soon.

Past them rushed a body of men.

One of them carried a torch.

Not one hundred yards distant was a log cabin.

It was the humble home of a miner. The fiends reached it.

The torch touched the thatch, and in an instant it was in flames.

The occupants rushed forth in terror, but they were struck down without mercy.

The flames leaped into the air from a dozen different parts of the town.

The incendiaries and murderers were acting in excellent concert. The town was aroused, and the din was indescribable.

The air was filled with yells and shouts and curses and rifle shots. In the open streets a battle raged.

Black Bill meant to destroy the town that night.

Allan Wyman and Van Dent had luckily escaped observation.

Both sprang up, and gazed, horror-stricken, at the scene of destruction which had opened.

"We must do something!" Allan shouted.

But Van Dent put an iron grasp upon his arm.

"Hold on," he said. "It would do no good. That would be folly."

"But what can we do?" cried Allan.

Then he checked himself.

Both at that moment saw a slender, lithe form go flying past them in the gloom.

It needed not instinct even to tell them who it was.

"The death's head!" gasped Van Dent.

Acting upon a common impulse both started in pursuit.

In the darkness they became separated. Allan did not see Van Dent again.

In his eagerness to overtake the death's head murderer, Allan gave little heed as to where his footsteps were carrying him.

He suddenly found himself in the center of the town again.

He was in a side street, and saw a mob of armed men rush around the corner.

Just in time the young Easterner shrank into the corner of a doorway.

The mob passed him, but one of them lingered to put a torch to the building.

Suddenly, and before Allan could act, a lithe form was upon the outlaw.

All was over in the twinkling of an eye.

He heard a crunching blow, a death cry, and a snarling exclamation:

"Curse ye! the debt is paid!"

Then one of the combatants bent over the other for a brief second, ere flitting away into the gloom.

When Allan awoke to a sense of action, he sprang forward.

Some motive impelled him to bend down over the victim.

The flames were leaping up over the cabin, and made the vicinity light as day.

The upturned, agonized face Allan recognized with an awful thrill.

"My God!" he cried. "At last the end has come. Black Bill is dead!"

It was indeed the famous outlaw chief.

Retribution had at last overtaken him. His end had come.

And there upon the dead man's brow Allan, with unspeakable horror, beheld the fearful mark of the death's head.

He remembered the words:

"The debt is paid!"

"Some one is avenged!" he muttered. "Man or devil, whatever it is, I must learn from its lips the fate of Harriet Van Dent!"

And with this desperate resolution, Allan started in pursuit of the avenger.

The latter had vanished around a corner, but Allan followed.

A moment later he saw the avenger's form leisurely striding into a path which led up the mountain.

The unknown's head was bent low, and he seemed wholly unconscious of what was going on about him.

Allan followed him with ease.

His first impulse was to overtake the unknown and attack him.

But second thought influenced him not to do this.

He might get the worst of it, and nothing would be gained.

After all the best and wisest course was to follow the avenger to his lair. This Allan proceeded to do.

Into the hills the young Easterner followed the unknown.

How far he was unable to estimate. Not once did he relax that same long stride.

And all the while he carried his head low bent upon his bosom.

Once in a while Allan fancied a deep sob escaped his lips.

On and on for miles the unknown went. They were now in a part of the hills very remote.

Suddenly the unknown paused before a high cliff.

He stooped, brushed aside some vines, and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER XII.

THE AVENGER'S ABODE.

Allan Wyman paused for one thrilling moment here.

What should he do?

Ought he to follow the avenger into that unknown place?

Would it not lead him to death?

But it was a crisis which called for great pluck and resolution.

Allan had both, and he did not hesitate longer.

He stepped instantly forward and lifted the vines.

This revealed a wide-mouthed cavern. It was as black as Erebus within it.

But Allan did not hesitate.

He plunged into the blackness.

In an instant he was seized in a giant-like grasp.

With all his strength he could not overcome it.

A dreadful hiss sounded in his ears, and talon fingers clutched his throat. He was instantly fainting.

Death seemed closing down upon him. The horror of the moment was awful.

Then he felt the grip relax.

A husky, snarling voice said:

"Who are you, and why have you followed me here?"

Allan recovered himself sufficiently to make reply:

"I am one who never did harm to living being. I am in quest of a young girl, Harriet Van Dent, whom you have in your power, if you have not murdered her."

Allan heard a peculiar, grating laugh.

"Oh, you are one of that party with the electric stage?"

"Yes."

"Come with me."

The grip was removed from Allan's throat, and he was led away through the darkness.

On and on until light suddenly burst upon the scene.

Then he was the witness of an astounding sight.

It was a rocky cavern chamber, with a fire in one corner, and oil lamps lighting it up. It was rudely furnished, and upon a rude stool which sat upon the edge of a huge bear-skin mat was a young girl.

Instantly Allan recognized her.

It was Harriet Van Dent.

Alive and well she was, and sprang up with a joyful cry.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You have come to take me to my father?"

Allan turned a swift glance upon the unknown.

But he could not descry the expression of his face because of the mask.

"Yes," said the mystic avenger, in a changed voice, "neither of you need fear harm."

"Thank God!" gasped Allan. "Then you have not murderous motives toward everybody?"

"To the contrary," replied the avenger. "But sit down. See, my hands are red with the blood of my foes. I must wash them, and then I will talk with you."

Allan, in a sort of daze, sank down upon a cushioned seat.

Harriet regarded him with a pale face, and said:

"He is a friend to us. He hates only the outlaws. Tell me of my father."

"He was well, and in quest of you when I last saw him."

"Ah, poor man, I have caused him much sorrow."

"Will your captor allow you to go from here?"

"Yes."

"Why have you remained here so long, then?"

"Ah, he has deemed it safer, for the outlaws were going to attack the town. Have they done so yet?"

"Yes; and the whole place is in flames. I fear the worst."

Harriet groaned with horror. At this moment the avenger returned.

"Here I am!" he said, in a pleasant voice. "And now for the transformation."

With a quick movement he removed the hideous mask.

A cry of amazement escaped Allan.

He recognized the features which were revealed.

The long yellow hair, the pleasant blue eyes and spectacles belonged to Alpheus Smoothbrow, the Quaker.

"You?" he gasped. "Are you the mystic avenger?"

"I am!" replied Smoothbrow, with an ironical smile.

Allan could not say more.

He sat still and gazed at the Quaker in a dazed manner.

"Am I dreaming?" he muttered.

"To the contrary, you are not," declared Alpheus Smoothbrow, quietly.

"But—I cannot believe my senses. Is it you who has placed the mystic brand upon so many people?"

"It is."

"You killed Black Bill?"

A lightning gleam shot from his eyes.

"I did," he said.

"And Bill Hurd and his passengers owe their death to you?"

"No."

"What?"

"I say no."

"But your brand was upon the brow of each one."

"I did that to disarm the outlaws," said Smoothbrow.

"Black Bill is responsible for their death. I merely found them and marked them as a blind."

Allan drew a deep breath.

"Then your feud is solely with the outlaws?"

"Solely. I have killed nigh a hundred of their gang, and have at last run to earth the arch fiend of them all. Heaven has favored me, and at last I am avenged!"

The mystic avenger's eyes flashed, and he went on:

"My work is done. I have shed the last drop of blood I ever shall. But in all my life I have harmed no other than the members of that viper gang."

Allan and Harriet listened silently.

The mystic avenger arose and paced once or twice up and down the cave.

"Shall I tell you how it came to pass?" he asked, bitterly. "I will do so. Two years ago I was happy, with my loving wife and three children in my happy mountain home.

"I was making a fortune in a secret placer, and had hidden the gold in a nook of the cabin.

"I dreamt that I was secure, but one day the fiends came, Black Bill at their head.

"They invaded my happy home, stole my treasure of gold. Had this been all I would not have complained.

"But they beat out fiendishly the brains of my children, and butchered my wife, literally cutting her in pieces. Oh, God! the sight which met my gaze when I came home! It nearly made of me a raving maniac.

"I gathered up the remains of my dear ones, and buried them on the mountain side.

"Then over the grave I swore an oath of vengeance. To further my ends I took the guise of a Quaker. My name is not Smoothbrow, but Oliver Martin. How well I have succeeded in my purpose you know!

"But my mission is fulfilled. The world is wide, and I shall find congenial atmosphere somewhere.

"I cannot merit less of my God, or of the respect of just men, for having stained my hands with the viper's blood as I have. This is my story."

Silence succeeded this statement of awful facts for a time.

Then Allan arose and held out his hand to Oliver Martin.

"I feel for you!" he said. "Wherever you go, I wish you success!"

"I thank you," replied the avenger, huskily.

He picked up a rifle, and went to the cavern exit.

"I am going now," he said, "there is nothing here I wish to take away. Stay here until danger is over in the valley. God bless you and protect you! Farewell!"

He vanished from sight. It was some while before either of the young people ventured to speak.

Then they did not attempt to discuss the subject so terrible to think of. The long night hours passed.

When morning came Allan went outside the cavern.

He climbed a tree, and from its top gained a view of the valley below.

He could see little of the town, for a dense cloud of smoke hung over it.

He knew not whether it was in existence yet or not. He could not tell whether any of his friends had survived the battle or not.

But he said to Harriet:

"Shall we take the risk and descend?"

She hesitated but a moment.

"I think we may," she said. "And God will protect us!"

Accordingly they left the avenger's cavern, and set out down the mountain for the town below.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END.

When the first intelligence of the outlaws' attack reached Frank Reade, Jr., he was in the tavern.

The electric stage had been left in the tavern yard.

Frank instantly opened the generators, and running up to the upper deck put a projectile in the breech of the gun.

The view from the top of the stage was thrilling.

The outlaws, with Black Bill at their head, were descending upon the town.

That they meant to destroy it was beyond doubt.

It was but a moment's work to send the electric stage rushing down the street.

A huge body of the outlaws were massed in the center of the thoroughfare.

They were engaged in deadly battle with the people of the town.

They were overwhelming the denizens when the stage arrived.

A shower of bullets came rattling against the shell of the stage.

The young inventor had trained the electric gun.

There was but a brief interval between the pressing of the electric button and the explosion.

The result was awful to witness.

The projectile exploded in the midst of the outlaw horde.

The outlaw band closed in furiously, however, in spite of the awful loss.

Again Frank threw a projectile among them.

The third one created such fearful loss of life that they were obliged to break and run.

The battle was over.

The miners everywhere pursued the villains, and shot them down like sheep.

It was the death knell of Black Bill's murderous band.

In less than two hours scarcely a handful of them was left alive. These made their escape to the hills.

When Frank saw that the battle was over, he turned his attention to saving the buildings which had not been fired.

By blowing up a few of the burning structures with a shot from the electric gun, he was enabled to do so.

Before daybreak the flames were subdued. Hocus Pocus was saved.

There was good reason for mutual congratulations.

And the vivid success was attributed wholly to Frank Reade, Jr., and his famous electric stage.

It was a happy throng which gathered about the Refuge in the early morning light.

Alexander Van Dent had found his way to the electric stage.

He had searched in vain for Allan, and had nearly given him up for lost, when Frank suddenly clutched his arm and cried:

"Look!"

Down the street he saw two familiar figures coming.

They were Allan and Harriet. With a delighted yell, the overjoyed father started for them.

The story was soon told.

For some days the electric stage continued to carry the mails. But finally, all danger from outlaws being over, Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp bid adieu to Staked Plains, and returned to Readestown.

Van Dent and Harriet remained in Hocus Pocus.

The name of the town was changed to Denton, and the millionaire became one of its leading men. To-day it is one of the handsomest cities in the State.

And Allan Wyman remained. Only a few weeks ago sweet Harriet Van Dent became his happy bride.

The mystic brand is yet a legend in Denton. What became of the avenger was never known.

But the fame of Frank Reade, Jr., and the electric stage can never die in that vicinity. It will live forever.

THE END.

Read "FRANK READE, JR.'S ELECTRIC AIR RACER; OR, AROUND THE WORLD IN THIRTY DAYS," which will be the next number (22) of the "Frank Reade Weekly Magazine."

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